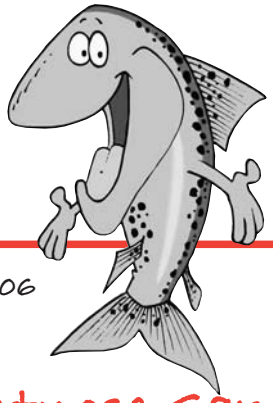
M·A·Y Club

MONTANA ANGLING YOUTH

Spring 2006



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Look Here!

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

May Club Feature Fish - Shortnose Gar

Montana Species of Special Concern

By: Kevin Fraley, Hooked on Fishing Volunteer Instructor

Think of a fish that survived and thrived during the time of the dinosaurs, roaming the waters in the company of the largest and meanest predators that ever walked or swam the earth. If that isn't amazing enough, think of a fish that weathered the calamity that destroyed all dinosaurs and many other species of animals and plants on earth 65 million years ago. To find such a fish, one needs to look no farther than the shortnose gar and its cousins.

The shortnose gar can be described as the ultimate survivor, a fish that has gone through countless trials throughout its long and challenging history on the planet. The earliest complete fossilized skeleton of the gar family (uncovered in West Africa), was dated back 110 million Years. However, the evidence of gar in North America does not extend that far back.

Only eight species of gar currently exist in the world. In North America, the representatives of the gar family (listed by size, smallest to largest) are the shortnose gar, the longnose gar, and the alligator gar. Two other rare members in North America are the spotted gar (exists only on Canadian coast of the Great Lakes) and the Florida gar.

The shortnose gar is relatively small, averaging 31 inches and 3.5 pounds. The Montana state record shortnose gar is 3 pounds, .96 ounces, and was caught August 17, 1977 in the Fort Peck Dredge Cuts. Shortnose gar spawn in May or June. Their eggs are attached to aquatic plant stems in clumps, and they hatch in 8-9 days.

This fish is only present in Montana in the Missouri River Dredge Cuts downstream of Fort Peck Reservoir, which is in the northeastern part of the state.

However, this fish is quite common in states to the east and south. Shortnose gar like large rivers, quiet pools, and backwaters. They have a high tolerance to warm, turbid (murky or cloudy) waters.

Shortnose gar are olive-green to brown in color, and fade to white on their undersides. Young shortnose gar less than ten inches long have a black stripe on their midline. Their bodies are covered with thick, diamond-shaped scales, and they are tube-like in shape, with an elongated, bony snout sporting one row of small, sharp teeth. Their tail fins have an interesting, rounded shape.

Shortnoses commonly eat fish and small crustaceans. However, shortnose gars are opportunistic, meaning they will eat almost anything they can get. Shortnose gar lie in wait for their prey, and then they pounce. Unlike a bass, gar cannot engulf their prey due to their small mouth. They have to rip and tear their food with their needle-like teeth.

These fish are not considered "game fish" because of their "poor quality flesh", so they are not usually desired by anglers except for novelty. Shortnose gar are difficult to catch on hook and line because of their almost impenetrable, bony mouth. Some anglers use a piece of frayed rope or a snarled ball of fishing line to tangle the gar's teeth in. Using this method, if the angler is lucky, he may be able to land the fish before the gar becomes untangled.

No matter if the shortnose gar can be eaten or not, this amazing prehistoric fish should be protected and respected. Many people consider the shortnose gar to be a "trash fish", and some slaughter them just like we swat flies. With proper management, and if people understand and respect the long history of this native Montanan fish, the shortnose gar may survive another hundred million years.

See fun facts about the shortnose gar on page 3

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Some Missouri Fish Traveled Far in 2005

By DAVE FULLER Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks

Telemetry crews will be gearing up for the 2006 Adopt-A-Fish program on the Missouri and Yellowstone rivers over the next couple of weeks.

Missouri-Yellowstone Adopt-A-Fish is a free Internet-based program where students and others can "adopt" native fish and follow their movements on the Missouri River below Fort Peck Dam and on the lower Yellowstone River. The first report of the year will be on April 6 and continue for the next two months.

As one of the biologists involved in the project, I've pulled out just a couple of our big movers from the 2005 season so last year's students can be reunited with their old friends and to let others know just what these critters are capable of doing.

The mover of the year award goes to Paddlefish No. 2 — Mr. No Bill. This fish (named Squishy, Sparky, Freddie or Alfred by some schools) was originally tagged in the Wolf Point area in the fall of 2004. The following spring, when flows were adequate, the fish migrated up the Missouri River and then up the Milk River above Glasgow — not once, but twice.

He then descended the 225-mile long Missouri River to Lake Sakakawea where he spent the summer. That's not all. In September, he migrated back up the Missouri River to the very exact spot he was in the spring, near Wolf Point. This was a minimum of 670 river miles for the season. You may think it is unusual for these native Missouri River fish to move so much in one year. But don't judge too quickly.

The second-place award for mover of the year goes to Blue Sucker No. 1, which traveled from Wolf Point to the Milk River above Glasgow, came back down the Milk and Missouri rivers, up the Yellowstone River to above Glendive, and then came all the way back to Wolf Point in the fall.

When it was all over and done, guess what? This fish returned to the exact same spot it was found in the spring. When the movements were totaled, I came up with 669 river miles, a mere 1 mile behind Mr. No Bill. But remember, these numbers are just minimums. Overall, the fish movements were impressive.

This year in the Adopt-A-Fish program, Glendive Fish, Wildlife and Parks biologist Matt Jaeger will be jumping onboard to extend our study area above the Intake Diversion Dam on the Yellowstone River.

Over the past four years we've been monitoring the movements of paddlefish, pallid sturgeon, shovelnose sturgeon and blue suckers. Jaeger will be surgically implanting channel catfish and burbot (or ling) to see how they respond to changes in temperature and flows.

We'll follow six species this year — paddlefish, pallid sturgeon and blue suckers tagged on the Missouri and shovelnose sturgeon, catfish and burbot tagged on the Yellowstone.

Missouri River Adopt-A-Fish allows schools, classrooms and home school students to "adopt" two fish and name them. They can then watch their movements on animated maps on the Internet and check out other Web pages to learn more about fish, fishing, the Missouri River and native species.

To learn more about the program, go to www.pikemasters.com/adopt-fish/home.html. To adopt a fish, go to www.pikemasters.com/adopt-fish/howtoadopt.html. For more information, e-mail Gazette outdoor editor Mark Henckel at flatlander@montana.com.

Missouri River Adopt-A-Fish is a joint effort of Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Walleyes Unlimited, Montana PikeMasters, U.S. Geological Survey, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and The Billings Gazette. Weekly updates will be posted on the Adopt-A-Fish site and in The Billings Gazette each Thursday through April and May.

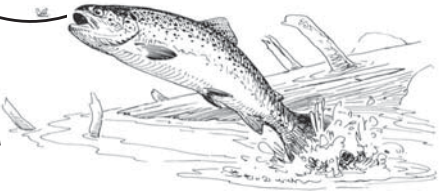
Man Caught by Fish!

Kids: Don't try this at home!

A fishing story by Wyatt Morris, Hooked on Fishing Student, 4th grader at Cross Currents Christian School in Whitefish

We went to our fishing spot and saw lots of fish. My Dad got a big fish that spit out the hook, and the hook flew back and stuck in his head. We had to go back to camp and perform surgery on my Dad. My Mom freaked out and couldn't watch as my uncle tried to pull the hook out with his Leatherman. The Leatherman got stuck on the hook because the pliers jammed shut. We discovered that skin can really stretch! To sum it all up, my uncle cut the hook and got it out of my Dad's head and we had a very fun camping trip that I will always remember…even if I didn't catch a fish.

Hooked ON FISHING



Now's the time for early season fishing on lakes, reservoirs

By Mark Henckel Billings Gazette outdoor editor

The ice is off lakes, ponds, and reservoirs. It's a good time to be trout fishing. After ice-out, the longer spring days, warmer temperatures and winds melt the winter away that has locked the top of these waters. With the wind comes waves that recharge the waters with dissolved oxygen. Trout react to this.

One great afternoon of fishing I can remember came when just a portion of the corner of a prairie pond was ice-free. Trout seemed to move to this area from all parts of the pond. The water, of course, was still bitter cold. In waters that cold, trout are sometimes moving slower than they will be later in spring and summer when waters warm up. But a slow approach with an olive-green nymph cast out toward the ice sheet caught their interest. I'd let the nymph sink, then ever-so-slowly bring it back in toward me with little twitches along the way.

Often in mid-twitch, I'd feel the gentle take of a trout grabbing hold of the fly. I'd simply raise the rod tip and the fight was on. Slow-action lures can also work at this time of year and bait fishing with night crawlers or other types of bait can also be effective.

Look for trout to be working the shallower waters near the banks. That's often where waters begin to warm first and insect life becomes active, providing a good food source for trout.

Also, because many pond and reservoir trout are rainbows, remember that spring is spawning time for this species. If there's runoff water trickling into the pond down a coulee, that will also attract trout to that part of the pond or reservoir, even if there's no viable area there for them to spawn. Trout fishing is a great way to spend a spring day. And it's happening now all across Montana.

Shortnose Gar continued from cover

Did You Know?

- Shortnose gar eggs are toxic to humans.
- Native Americans used to use gar scales as arrowheads.
- Some other gar species are the Cuban gar and the tropical gar.
- The shortnose gar's cousin, the alligator gar can reach lengths of 8 feet and weights of 300 pounds!
- The shortnose gar and its cousins can breathe out-of-the-water by using their swim bladder as a lung!
- The shortnose gar's scientific name *(Lepisosteus platostomus)* translates in Greek to "bony scale" and "long mouth".
- A single shortnose gar specimen, the only one collected in Montana other than in the Fort Peck Dredge Cuts, was collected in the Yellowstone River 15 miles upstream from where the river joins with the Missouri.
- Young shortnose gar live solitary lives suspended near the surface.
- Shortnose gars can live in waters with almost no oxygen because of their lung-functioning swim bladder.

Kootenai Redband Trout

By: Kyle J. Breithaupt, Hooked on Fishing Student, 8th Grader, Sylvanite School, Yaak, MT

Where in the state of Montana can you find redband trout?… give up? They are found in northwestern Lincoln County, in the Yaak River Valley. Western Montana's only native rainbow trout, Kootenai River redband, is also known as the inland redband rainbow trout.

The Yaak River Valley is well known for its fly-fishing, however, anglers may encounter two endangered fish, the bull trout and the inland redband rainbow trout. Both species of fish are protected so the angler must catch and release. In other words, when one of these species is caught, the angler must return the fish back to the water immediately.

The strongest populations in the Yaak can be found in the headwaters of the North Fork, East Fork and Basin Creek. This genetically pure population is more secure in the roadless portion of Basin Creek, which lies right next to Mount Henry's roadless area. Below the Yaak Falls is where you can find the largest size of the redbands. However, it is difficult to access this part of the river.

Concern has arisen recently about the Kootenai River Basin redband trout's population. They

continued on back page

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- Anyone preschool through elementary can join!
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- Receive fun newsletters at your home filled with information, tips, & games!
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Redband Trout

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are at high risk of extinction due to the breaking apart of their habitat, stream habitat reduction and breeding with non-native redband trout. Why is there such a good population of redband in the Yaak River Valley? The area includes the strongest population of genetically pure redband, which are protected from breeding with non-native rainbow trout. Why? Because there are natural barriers, like the falls near Lake Okoga on the East fork of the Yaak River.

Redband trout are very important to the people of Montana because they are a Montana species of special concern. Even when you fish in the Yaak River and the creeks, you need to check and make sure that you are not taking one of the redband from the water.

PLEASE HELP THE REDBAND SURVIVE!

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